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ABSTRACT

A review of the country school in literature discusses Irving's "The Legend of Sleppy Hollow," Whittier's "Snowbound" and "In School Days," Eggleston's "The Hoosier School Master," and Stuart's "To Teach, To Love" and "The Thread That Runs So True." These literary works portray the country school teacher as being the brunt of larger or older boys' pranks, being poorly paid, and being housed with members of the local community. Neihardt's "All Is But A Beginning, Youth Remembered, 1881-1901" recounts the author's teaching experiences in Nebraska. Winther's "Take All Nebraska," Nielsen's "Life in An American Denmark," and Yost's "No Time on My Hands," describe the Americanization of immigrants. Other Nebraska literary works mentioned are: Aldrich's "A Lantern in My Hand"; Piper's "Barbed Wire and Other Wayfarers"; Sandoz' "Sand Hill Sundays"; Christy's "And Never Let Us Cry"; and Chrisman's "When You and I Were Young, Nebraska." A Poem, "Poet in Residence at a Country School," by Donovan Welch, concludes the review. (AH)

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COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY: Humanities on the Frontier

THE COUNTRY SCHOOL IN LITERATURE

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Ernest Grundy
English Department
Kearney State College
Kearney, Nebraska

Paper presented at the School of Humanities and Fine Arts Series, Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska, November 19, 1981.

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COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY: HUMANITIES ON THE FRONTIER

The Mountain Plains Library Association is pleased to be involved in this project documenting the country school experience. Funding of this project from the National Endowment for the Humanities, cost sharing and other contributions enabled us all to work with the several state-based Humanities Committees as well as many other state and local libraries, agencies and interested citizens. We are deeply impressed not only by the enthusiasm for this work by all concerned but by the wealth of experience brought to bear in focusing attention on--and recapturing--this important part of history, and how we got here. This project seems to identify many of the roots and "character formation" of our social, political and economic institutions in the West.

Already the main Project objective seems to be met, stimulating library usage and increasing circulation of historical and humanities materials in this region. Public interest is rising in regional, state and local history. Oral history programs are increasing with greater public participation. The study of genealogy--and the search for this information--is causing much interest in consulting--and preserving--historical materials. What has been started here will not end with this project. The immediate results will tour the entire region and be available for any who wish the program, film, and exhibit. There will be more discussion of--and action on---the issues involving the humanities and public policies, past and present. The Mountain Plains Library Association is proud to be a partner in this work, the County School Legacy, and its contribution to understanding humanities on the frontier.

Joseph J. Anderson
Nevada State Librarian
Past President
Mountain Plains Library Association

Read 11-19-81 for School of Humanities and Fine Arts Series, Kearney State College, by Ernest Grundy

The Country School in Literature

The Country School Legacy project has been amply publicized so I will say only that it is an eight-state endeavor, sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, also that for the past year and a half or so, two associates and I have been searching out that legacy. We have obtained histories of more than a hundred schools, have tape-recorded at least that many people, and have built up a considerable bibliography. The past six months, Jim Brummels, poet-in-residence at Wayne State, Sandra Scofield of Chadron State, and I have been going up and down the land offering seminars on the subject.

The articles we have written--my final report is book-length--, the letters we have collected, the cassette tapes, historical and biographical forms, a good color film, a booklet, and other display materials have been placed in the Kearney State Library for all to behold.

The tapes, letters, and so on are interesting, but this afternoon I will draw on literature to give the talk I did not earlier feel I could give. I was not convinced that the general audiences would appreciate that exclusive concern with literature. So, this is a paper I have been wanting to write. I hope it does not blunt any amiable receptivity you had prepared for me.

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We could begin with the country school in Puritan times. But why seek in Massachusetts antiquity to learn that "In Adam's fall, we sinned all" when sensory, corroborating evidence lies all around us for the plucking? We will plunge in a bit later with material a bit removed, although it will still savor of Puritan land. Like the Ancient Greeks, it is difficult to get completely away from our gloomy ancestors.

Colonial Massachusetts exported its pedlars, its men of the cloth, and its teachers abroad. One fictional member was Ichabod Crane who sought to teach the Sleepy Hollow school in New York among the sturdy, substantial, phlegmatic Dutch. Besides droningly lining out the Bay Book psalms to his students and teaching them their numbers, Ichabod, an unlovely fellow with a name to match, hankered after the lovely Katrinka Van Tassel, or her wealth, or both. Sad for Ichabod, Brom Bones had about the same interests in the Dutch girl. You know who won. Dressed in a garb ancestral to the robes of the Ku Klux Klan, he shattered a mellow pumpkin on Ichabod's head and thus banished him from the area.

He possibly did move farther west and, since he was looking for a soulmate, it is too bad that it couldn't have been two hundred years later, for, out in the prairie states, were thousands of single schoolteachers a writer described as "a mob of mobile maidens meditating matrimony." Timing is everything.

Viewed from a lofty plane, one might see this story as Irving's humorous barb at his fellow New Yorkers and their antipathy to the learning and aggressiveness of the New England imports, but, looking at it from a considerably lowel level, one might conclude that it took a robust person to teach a country school, as we will later notice in other situations.

Whittier is a dimmer luminary than Irving in American literary history. But for his classical allusions, his poems lack complexity--the summum bonum of contemporary literary studies. Consider what Irving Howe says of his poetry:

> His poetic limitations are as transparent as his moral strengths. He yields himself much too easily to an insistent and threadbare didacticism; he has almost no ironic distance from his own beliefs; he slides comfortably into the sentimental; and his verse has a way of clopping along, like a well-broken horse on a familiar country road.

Howe states my feelings pretty well. I would find it difficult to teach Whittier's poems, for I don't know what I would find to say about them in any extended sense, and there are the requirements of the class period. Students would have the same problem in finding critical issues in them. I recall reading a volume of Whittier's anti-slavery poems for historical purposes. I was attempting to discover his position on the issue, and it wasn't hard to determine. He hated slavery.

All of this acknowledged, I still like certain of his poems.

Be as be may, however, Whittier left two that touch on the country schools. One, "Snowbound," most people recall mainly by the title, I suspect, for who of us in recent years has read through its 800 lines of photomontage?

Among that group of New Englanders sitting the stove around, when

> The sun that brief December day
> Rose cheerless over hills of gray,
> And, darkly circled gave at noon
> A sadder light than waning moon,

among that group sat one, "Brisk wielder of the birch and rule,/ "The master of the district school." His was a youthful, laughing

face on which "scarce appeared/The uncertain prophecy of beard." A refugee from the "wild" Northern hills of New Hampshire where sat Dartmouth, he was even more than three persons in one. He was a violinist, a scholar, a raconteur, and a moonlighter, for he "could doff at ease his scholar's gown/To peddle wares from town to town."

In this friendly account, one misses threats against the teacher seen in Irving's Sleepy Hollow and in others we will take note of later. Still, if the teacher was a "brisk wielder of the birch and rule," it is possible that in the aftermath of the snowstorm, a part Whittier doesn't include, with a second, clear dawn coming, the youngsters' animal scirits, in tow while at home, might ~~unleash them~~ be unleashed at school, and we would then have our violence.

But, such has to be idle speculation. These youngsters, if Quaker like Whittier, would surely have been prompted to behave in accordance with the mild, inner light they all possessed, not having been nurtured on the conviction that, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." Suppose?

In a poem, "In School Days," Whittier/earlier days occasioned thought of by seeing the schoolhouse he once attended, "a ragged beggar sunning," he called it. The old building recalls to his mind the girl who walked homeward with him after school hours. Her "soft hand's light carressing" the poet, she confessed,

"I'm sorry that I spelt the word:
I hate to go above you,
Because," the brown eyes lower fell,--
"Because you see, I love you!"

Although the grasses on her grave had "for forty years been growing," Whittier remembered her in reflecting--

He lives to learn, in life's hard school,
  How few who pass above him
Lament their triumph and his loss,
  Like her,--because they love him.

These two were nostalgic, sentimental, gentle poems.and convey their thoughts in a calm, reposeful manner, but still without the humor of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." But, to another writer, this time Edward Eggleston whose life span from 1807 to 1892 matched Whittier's exactly.

Taking into account the great emphasis on spelling matches in the country schools of the nineteenth century, one must conclude, Eggleston remarked, that the chief end of man was to learn how to spell. His "classic," The Hoosier School-Master, 1871, suggested that spelling was the "national game" in Hoopole County in Southern Indiana, with shucking the only other public competition. Our "crooked orthography" he thought a blessed thing, for else there could have been no spelling schools. Even today, I suggest, our "crooked orthography" can often bring a student's paper in English composition into disfavor.

Of course, Eggleston pitted the young teacher, another one with "uncertain prophecy of beard," against the local champion. The teacher saved his own reputation. He ousted the local speller. He fell, however--I shorten the story considerably--to a pretty but humble indentured servant girl over "Daguerreotype," which he began "Dau." They had worked past "incomprehensibility," a real nut to crack in my day, also, I suspect, past "anti-disestablishmentarianism." You are not surprised that Ralph

escorted young Hannah home, that one thing led to another and they were finally wed, but not until they had leaped over some stock obstacles, one being that Ralph had to go on trial and was saved from prison because the real robber /having confessed, gotten religion, as they say.

One "character" actor in this novel was the Squire, who was the chief pronouncer at the spelling matches. An odd-looking bombaster, he was got up in a swallow-tail coat, a pair of black gloves, a dirty, waxen-colored wig, not held firmly in place, spectacles which slipped off, a glass eye perpetually out of phase with its companion, and/false teeth moving often out of synch with his jaws. Eggleston made the most of this comic piece.

Squire Hawkins, like Ichabod Crane, was another Massachusetts exportation, but, by the time of the spell-down his idioms had been overlaid with Western (Indiana) pronunciations. Let the Squire speak for himself--

> I feel as if I could be grandiloquent on this interesting occasion (twisting his scalp around), but raley I must forego any such exertions. It is spelling you want. Spelling is the corner-stone, the grand, underlying subterfuge, of a good eddication. I put the spellin'-book prepared by the great Daniel Webster alongside the Bible. I do, raley. I think I may put it ahead of the Bible. For if it wurn't fer spellin'-books and sich occasions as these, where would the Bible be? I should like to know. The man who got up, who compounded this work of inextricable valoo was a benufactor to the whole human race or any other. (Here the spectacles fell off. The Squire replaced them in some confusion, gave the top of his head another twist, and felt of his glass eye, while poor Shocky--a naive youngster--stared in wonder, and Betsey Short rolled from side to side in the effort to suppress her giggle.)

Again, who can say that Eggleston didn't mine this comic vein pretty thoroughly?

It seems hard for me to pass up this simple novel. One more incident and I will move on to more modern things. A present-day supplicant for a teaching post in a fair-sized system may apply to a principal or a superintendent. . This easy task has disadvantaged her beyond measure. It has been a sterile experience. Even though she applies for a place in one of the 390 one-room country schools of Nebraska, she has probably had a cake-walk. When they applied for jobs in yesteryear, teachers had a truly enrichening experience, as Ralph Hartsook's interview with "old Jack Means," might disclose. Means was trustee of the Flat Creek district. He speaks--

> "You see," continued Mr. Means, spitting in a meditative sort of way, "you see, we a'n't none of your saft sort in these diggins. It takes a man to boss this deestrick. Howsumdever, ef you think you kin trust your hide in Flat Crick school-house I ha'n't got no 'bjection. But ef you git licked, don't come on us. Flat Crick don't pay no insurance, you bet! Any other trustees? Wal, yes. But as I pay the most taxes t'others jist let me run the thing. You can begin right off a Monday. They a'n't been no other applications. You see, it takes grit to apply for this school. The last master had a black eye for a month. But, as I wuz sayin', you can jist roll up and wade in. I 'low you've got spunk, maybe, and that goes for a heap sight more'n sinoo with boys. Walk in, and stay over Sunday with me. You'll hev' to board roun', and I guess you better begin here."

Eggleston contended that his Hoosier School-Master was the "file-leader of the procession of American dialect novels." I am willing to concede him this distinction.

He missed a lick or so in this hiring scene. He did include some details that may have been overdone for dramatic effect. Means' big bulldog sniffed menacingly around Ralph's pants legs all the while; his two sons stood to one side looking quite physically at the candidate for Flat Crick teaching honors, and a nonpulchritudiousness teen-age daughter giggled at the thought

he might be eaten by the bulldog. But, when the author told about the hiring, he never brought up the question of wages. If my experiences as rural school teacher in the 1930's told me anything, the first question asked by the board member should have been, "How much'll you work for? I owe it to the taxpayers of the district to get a teacher just as cheap as we can. Times have been hard this year, the crops poor," and on and on.

Irving, Whittier, and Eggleston wrote in the nineteenth century. Jesse Stuart, who told of his long years of teaching in Greenup County in northeastern Kentucky, is a modern author. I have looked into two of his books on teaching--To Teach, To Love, first copyrighted in 1936, and The Thread That Runs So True, 1949.

Because there is too much to recount in his books about the country school, I will select one feature--the schoolteacher's being challenged by boys who were as old or older than he was, and often larger. It is a thread that has run through my previous references--from Ichabod's problems with Brom Bones, through Whittier's description of the schoolmaster as "brisk wielder of the birch and rule," to Ralph Hartsook's notice by old Jack Means that the boys stood ready to throw him out.

And so it was with Jesse Stuart. In his first teaching post at Lonesome Valley School, being not even seventeen, Stuart made it a point to have the twenty-year-old son of a board member convoy him to school. He had convinced this strapping young stalwart to resume his education, partly as support. Stuart

had heard that Guy Hawkins, the community and school bully, would be waiting for him on his first day. Guy had chased the teacher's sister of nineteen from the school before she could complete her term, had in fact blacked her eyes while her students watched. The young teacher had made a prudent move. The first day passed without challenge from Guy. As did two or three others.

We are not to be disappointed, however. Good theater demands they meet in combat, and they did, as early as Chapter Three, but not before the teacher had made a commendable and also prudent effort to avoid it. First, he promoted the larger and older Hawkins from the first grade where he had languished for something like eight years. Then he permitted his man-child the undemanding task of carrying water from a nearby farmstead.

Nonetheless, one night after school, the bully showed up and announced he would "whip" the teacher. So, the fight was on. I will pick it up just after Stuart hit his opponent with a haymaker and then a flying tackle:

> His face hit flat against the floor and his nose was flattened. The blood spurted as he started to get up.
> I let him get to his feet. I wondered if I should. For I knew it was either him or me. One of us had to whip. When he did get to his feet after that terrible fall, I waded into him. I hit fast and I hit hard. He swung wild. His fingernail took a streak of hide from my neck and left a red mark that smarted and the blood oozed through. I pounded his chin. I caught him on the beardy jaw. I reeled him back and followed up. I gave him a left to the short ribs while my right in a split second caught his mouth. Blood spurted again. Yet he was not through. But I knew I had him.

And Stuart did have him. He knocked Hawkins out, then revived him, reflecting that just a few hours before he had been teaching his pupil how to spell simple words! To his credit, the vanquished one said, "Mr. Stuart, I really got it poured on me. You're some fighter." Despite repeated sandings, the floor never

lost its bloodstains, reminders to all that this teacher had established supremacy.

Stuart's title, To Teach, To Love, says that all of his experiences as country schoolteacher in Kentucky's ridge country were not tenseful. He loved his days both as student and as teacher as these lines from the book testify--

> I loved school. I loved school as a barefoot kid, I loved it as a teacher. We never called our kids from the Kentucky hills "culturally deprived," though many of their folks couldn't read or write; we just taught them and they learned.

He pointed out that these schools had in effect an "Accelerated School Program," because a student learned what went on in grades ahead of him. For himself, he could have skipped the grade ahead. A brother, James, worked through the grades so rapidly that he entered the consolidated high school at Greenup at ten and graduated at fourteen. In interviewing older former country school students, I have noticed they defend their schooling on the basis just mentioned. Senator Carl.T. Curtis made a big point of it.

The last two paragraphs of To Teach, To Love may be a fitting leave=taking of this Kentucky writer--

> One teacher taught all eight grades and usually enjoyed it. At least I did. Education to them and for them was idealistic and the greatest thing they could pass along in life. The children I taught were, more often than not, unspoiled, eager, and ambitious. And they managed to convey the impression that they enjoyed my classroom. Maybe they were faking it--but you know I don't think so.
>
> We've lost something we've got to get back. Not the one-room schoolhouse, but the spirit of the one-room schoolhouse. I am incurably optimistic about young people and have boundless faith in the kind of people who go into teaching. We'll get it back.

Let us consider how Nebraska writers have dealt with the country schools. None has given them the full-scale treatment as in Stuart's books, only touching on them as part of a larger work. At least two poets have written on country school matters.

As he told it in his All is But a Beginning, Youth Remembered, 1881-1901 (1972), matters of discipline came out all right for John G. Neihardt in his first teaching post in the country near Bancroft, Nebraska. The moderator of the school board warned him that the boys in the school needed a good thrashing, enough said to give a fledgling teacher forebodings about his task. He knew that he was replacing a young woman teacher who had been driven out in December. "Three husky cornfeds" there might think they could do the same with him. This was, I suggest, the Jesse Stuart situation in duplicate.

But, the nearly diminutive Neihardt, not much taller than five feet, had no reason to doubt his physical strength. Didn't he have a chest expansion of ten inches, and couldn't he tear a pack of playing cards in two with only his hands, and didn't he have the high score of 1705 on the striking machine, all this and a trick wrestling hold,he asked himself reassuringly?

The chance to put his strength to use came soon during a snow fight when the students ganged up on him. Suddenly, Bill Kendrick, "amply shouldered and chested like a buffalo bull calf," scooped up a handful of snow, bent on washing the teacher's face. What an ideal time for the trick wrestling hold! Neihardt upended the pupil and slammed him down on his back. Humbled, Kendrick reached

out, placed his hand on Neihardt's shoulder and laughed. Discipline ceased to be a concern.

Stan Smith, once a traveling companion of Neihardt, has remarked that the author often recalled his teaching days in the country school. The book just cited has but little more on them, however. Another incident may be of some interest. Like most country school teachers, Neihardt had to board with one of the families in the district. He had his own bed; that is, he did until one Friday night the mistress of the household told him that a visiting preacher would be sharing it with him. She was wrong. Because he didn't relish the prospect of bunking down with the minister, Neihardt walked over snow-covered fields at night the nearly twenty miles to his parents' home.

In The Country School Legacy project, we have sought to ascertain what roles country schools played in the Americanization of the various ethnic groups that came to Nebraska in the wake of public legislation that made it first a territory and then a state, with millions of acres of land inviting settlement.

Several members of ethnic groups have told me in taped interviews that their Americanization was a gradual, benevolent process. It was not, however, for Hans Grimsen, a fictive character in Josphus Winther's Take All to Nebraska (1936). The Grimsen family had come to Nebraska from Denmark via Massachusetts. Experiences in that Eastern state were trying enough to make them apprehensive about the newer land to the west. The Nebraska experience proved their misgivings to be well founded. Hans' mother wished her son didn't have to go to the Nebraska rural school, as if expecting

trouble. Hans was enthusiastic about it. Accoutered as he was, however, with a red tobacco-box lunch bucket, wearing short pants topped by a cream-colored blouse, and black stockings with newly polished shoes, his yellow curls freshly combed, Hans was a marked boy, and he soon found school to be anything but a pleasant experience.

First, a group of boys, knowing the Grimsen children to be newly-arrived foreigners, accosted them rudely. One tried to get Hans' pail, so different from their own syrup buckets. He averted the attempt, but it led to Hans' brother taking up the insult. A fight ensued, soon broken up by the teacher's bell.

School took up. A Bible reading was followed by the group singing, "Way Down Upon the Swanee River." Not knowing more than a few words in English, Hans was nonplussed by it all. After opening exercises, instruction in the alphabet began. Later, the teacher asked for some one to recite a poem from memory. No one offered to. At last, Hans volunteered with two lines in Danish until raucous laughter stopped him. In the least cruel account Winther gave of her, the teacher told him that he must not speak in a foreign language, only in English. The boy had learned, at the cost of shame and confusion, a hard lesson in becoming Americanized. To top off the miserable first day for Hans, he was made to be the victim of the "flying jump." The school bully, a man of twenty, propelled him off his feet for a distance of twenty feet, causing the youngster to land on his face and bloody it. His brothers took him home at once.

Hans came to expect decent treatment from one teacher, a Dane, "plump, attractive, laughter-loving, and kind," but she receives scant treatment from Winther, maybe because kind.

Another teacher receives more space, "a self-complacent, little woman about twenty-five years old." She wore a "hard, superior smile that seemed to be frozen on her face." An autocrat without compassion for her students, she would approach students from the back and whack them over the hands with a short stick, one of her ways of tyrannizing over the children. Of course, they grew to hate her. Amid such conditions, the Grimsen children's assimilation into "American" culture was largely unpleasant, and they must have wondered, I suggest, why the land agent in Denmark had not told them the full story.

Americanization wasn't a major problem for Alfred C. Nielsen, as he related it in his Life in An American Denmark (1962). This "American Denmark" was situated at Nysted, a settlement about five miles northwest of Dannebrog. The Nysted folk school, which Nielsen attended, is well known in American-Danish literature. Just a half-mile east sat a two-room brick building, the public school. Here, as in so many other buildings like it, a most important work was done--that of E Pluribus Unum. Unconsciously, the public school made Americans of Danish children.

Whereas a few "misguided" teachers of the Danish vacation school told the children they owed their primary allegiance to Denmark, the public school teachers offered studies in American history, not Danish. For these relative newcomers, it was not the wars of the Danes against the Germans in the school games. Rather, they were of Lexington and Concord, of Bunker Hill, of Gettysburg, and San Juan Hill. American patriots formed one side against British Redcoats, the Blue fought the Gray, and the Rough Riders rushed San Juan Hill against the Spaniards. "The Little Red Schoolhouse" was an effective Americanizing agent, Nielsen concluded of his early days in the country.

Nellie Snyder Yost's No Time on My Hands (1962) tells of immigrant Swedish students of the Roten Valley School north of Gothenberg in a way that suggests that established children and immigrants got along quite well. Some distinctions were noticed, of course, but the Swedish children suffered only mild forms of teasing, nothing of the severity pictured by Winther. The teacher spoke kindly to the newcomers, for instance. Other students helped a Swedish girl with her English and found only gentle humor in such mishandled phrases as, "Huh, I don't feel no smell" and "Oh, please let me use you to leg," the speaker wanting to lean on someone.

The remembrances of quite a lot of people I interviewed leaned mostly toward the Nielsen and Yost versions.

I will only mention other Nebraska writers who have commented on the country school experience. An account of a literary appears in Bessie Streeter Aldrich's A Lantern in Her Hand. The novel tells of such poems as Poe's "The Raven" and "The Wreck of the Hesperus" being recited there. While the book does seem to have the spirit of the country school pretty well depicted, the setting for this portion, at Woodpecker School, is actually in Iowa. Small matter.

Known among Nebraskans, if known at all, is poet Edwin Ford Piper for his volume of poetry, Barbed Wire and Other Wayfarers (1926), which includes a poem of several stanzas, "The School-mistress." Piper describes well the near-primitive conditions under which Mildred taught--the sod house, the fire-building, the children at work on benches--then concludes each part of the poem by commenting on how small her remuneration was. I cite but a few lines--

Sometimes a mouse runs rustling; harmless snakes
Come sliding to the floor, or up the logs
A dusky lizard darts.
'Tis here she moves,
The genius of the place, viewed as all wise
In booklore, honest, patient, loving, kind,
Courageous; all these talents for the sum
Of twenty-five a month and board herself.

In her Sand Hills Sundays, Mari Sandoz comments on the features of the school building where she taught, noting how the walls and ceilings harbored snakes. William Christy's master's thesis, And Never Let Us Cry, contains a story, "The Ain't Box," which recalls how exacting rural school teachers struggled to excise "ain't" from the language. Christy's stories grew out of his experiences in the Gates-New Milburn area twenty miles north of Broken Bow. From the same area, Berna Hunter Chrisman drew on her experiences for the book, When You and I Were Young, Nebraska, edited principally by her son, Harry Chrisman, a Western writer of some forty years standing. Incidentally, also within this small compass of three miles or so lay the Solomon D. Butcher homestead. Butcher left a valuable legacy in pioneer photography, some of which was country schools.

Given the instances of Ichabod Crane, of John G. Neihardt and others, one might conclude that a tenseful ambiance hovered over the country schools, despite such testimony as Stuart's. Can it be that the fights and near-fights dominate because they are more traumatic and therefore more dramatic? In the event that the element of "love" has not had its proper portion in this account, I should like to report that most former country schoolteachers maintain they did not have severe discipline problems and do stress the presence of love, that greatest of all qualities, in their rural schools. This testimony from a

voice you will soon recognize well condenses what I have heard others say--

Transcription of oral interview of Governor Charles Thone by Ernest Grundy at State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska, September 3, 1981. Transcribed by Ernest Grundy from cassette tape.

(Grundy had just asked Governor Thone if he had ever felt disadvantaged by having attended a country school for seven years--he graduated in that period of time.)

Governor Thone: Your question on being disadvantaged hangs with me just a little because it's been brought up before. I think we may have had an advantage in District 108. I think probably what occurred in many of those country schools was the close-knitness of our group, the lack of any kind of jealousies or any kind of competition, if you want to call it that, that you run into in some of the more large or more sophisticated schools. We had a very homogeneous group. I guess what I am saying even from the teachers and from the homes at that time was the overabundance of love that we had in northern Cedar County and, if you please, in District 108. There was real caring and sharing. I feel that warmth to this day, Ernest, and it has served me well. I don't know that I am expressing totally my reflections of my feelings in that regard. Maybe you had to have been in one of those settings to really appreciate what I am trying to say here, but I guess it's a lesson that parents in particular should never forget. I remind myself of it every once in a while and I know Mrs. Thone does as far as our three daughters are concerned. They'll overlook an awful lot as long as they feel you love them. And I think it's necessary that we parents should tell our children that frequently.

and in conclusion

Apropos of this thought, let us hear from a poet reading his own poem, probably the latest written on a country school. It is also the best one. First appearing in The Rarer Game, it has been picked up by a booklet, The Country School Legacy. The poem is a compliment to the project.

over

"Poet in Residence at a Country School"

The school greets me like a series
of sentence fragments sent out to recess.
Before I hit the front door
I'm into a game of baseball soccer.
My first kick's a foul; my second sails
over the heads of the outfielders;
rounding third base, I suck in my stomach
and dodge the throw of a small blue-eyed boy.
I enter the school, sucking apples of wind.
In the fifth-grade section of the room
I stand in the center of an old rug and ask,
Where would you go where no one could find you,
a secret place where you'd be invisible
to everyone except yourselves;
what would you do there; what would you say?
I ask them to imagine they're there,
and writing a poem. As I walk around the room,
I look at the wrists of the kids,
green and alive, careful with silence.
They are writing themselves into fallen elms,
corners of barns, washouts, and alkali flats.
I watch until a tiny boy approaches,
who says he can't think of a place,
who wonders today, at least, if
he just couldn't sit on my lap.
Tomorrow, he says, he'll write.
And so the two of us sit under a clock,
beside a gaudy picture of a butterfly,
and a sweet poem of Christina Rosetti's.
And in all that silence, neither of us
can imagine where he'd rather be.

Dr. Donovan Welch
Kearney State College
Kearney, Nebraska

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